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## LINCOLN IN WISCONSIN

JULIUS E. OLSON

In treating this subject of Lincoln in Wisconsin I shall give but little time to Lincoln's participation in the Black Hawk War of 1832, as that phase of his life has been adequately presented by others. I desire mainly to call particular attention to the fact that Lincoln was in the state at that time as a soldier, and hence not at liberty to roam about to satisfy the natural curiosity of his inquiring mind. He was among the first to respond to the call of Governor Reynolds for troops to repel the invasion of Black Hawk. Though but twenty-three years of age, he was chosen captain of a company of militia, reported to have been a "hard set of men." In commanding them Lincoln had at least one opportunity to demonstrate his courage and his power to sway the minds of men, when he appeared as the defender of an old Indian who had strayed into camp; the men thought him a spy and wanted blood.

Before getting into Wisconsin Lincoln's company, with others, was mustered out; but not all of these men returned to their homes. Lincoln reenlisted on the same day of his discharge, May 28, and became a private in the Independent Spy Company. As such he crossed the state line near the site of Beloit on June 30, 1832. For ten days the troops pressed northward up the Rock River, finding many traces of the Indians, but encountering no warriors. On July 10 near Fort Atkinson the Company was mustered out by a young officer who later was to become famous during the Civil War, Major Robert Anderson; Lincoln and his companions returned home before the battles of Wisconsin Heights and Bad Axe brought the war to an end, August 2. Lincoln's stay in Wisconsin was but brief, probably about a fortnight.

Besides giving Lincoln an exciting though bloodless outing, and an opportunity to test his mettle as a man, this war brought him to the notice of Major John F. Stuart, a lawyer of Springfield, who befriended him as a student of law and invited him in 1837 to become his law partner.

Lincoln's second visit to Wisconsin has been veiled in more or less mystery. After a record in popular tradition of nearly half a century, an account of it appeared in the *History of Washington and Ozaukee Counties* published in 1881 by The Western Historical Company. This is a pretentious and seemingly reliable volume of 763 pages, over three hundred of which are devoted to the general history of the state, and includes among its contributors such well-known names as C. W. Butterfield, the historian, Professor T. C. Chamberlin, State Geologist, Dr. P. R. Hoy, Professor Edward Searing, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Professor W. W. Daniells, and Professor Roland D. Irving. These names induce faith in that part of the work relating to the counties under special consideration, though the name of the compiler is not given.

The passage relating to Lincoln appears in the history of Port Washington, Ozaukee County, and reads as follows:<sup>1</sup>

The first dwelling house built in the village was erected by Gen. Harrison in 1835. It is still standing, apparently in a good state of preservation. It is a little story-and-a-half frame building, gable end, the sills resting on the ground. A partition divides the first floor into two apartments, and also the upper or half story. It was at this house that the first votes of the town were polled. This old and time-worn structure has become one of the sacred relics of the past, commanding a prominent place in the history of the town of Port Washington, not only on account of the relation it bears to the first white settler of the village, but because it once served as a shelter to one of America's greatest statesmen. It may be of interest to mention the fact that the great and martyred President, Abraham Lincoln, during his days of roughing it, once walked from Milwaukee to Sheboygan, and stopped a night in this old house. After the defeat of the Merrimac by the Monitor, Mr. Lincoln, in company with some of his Cabinet officers, visited Fortress Monroe to get a practical knowledge of the fort. While

<sup>1</sup> P. 508.

viewing the works, desiring some information, he approached an officer, who proved to be Capt. Beger, from Port Washington. "Well, my man," said Lincoln, "where are you from?" "Port Washington," replied the Captain. "Port Washington—let me see: that is in Wisconsin, about twenty-five miles north of Milwaukee, is it not?" The Captain answered that it was. "I stopped there over night once," said the President; "just name over some of the men who lived there in the early days." The Captain proceeded to name over quite a number, finally mentioning that of Harrison. "Harrison, that is the man!" said Mr. Lincoln. "I remember him well." He then walked off to join his escort, leaving Capt. Beger very much elated to think that his town had been honored by the presence of so great a man.

This General Harrison was not a Harrison of national fame. His name was Wooster Harrison, though familiarly termed "General" Harrison by the old settlers. He was a native of New York; the history we have cited says:<sup>2</sup> "What he lacked in education was supplied by a wonderful gift of natural wit. His reputation for story-telling extended throughout the whole of eastern Wisconsin. . . . He was a man much sought after by the early settlers, when any great gathering was to be held, to create mirth for the crowd."

It is not strange that Lincoln remembered him well.

The record of the county history is, in some details, supplemented by an interview furnished by Harry W. Bolens, ex-mayor of Port Washington, which appeared in the *Milwaukee Daily News*, during the year of the Lincoln Centenary, when so many new incidents of Lincoln's career came to light. The interview refers to the story as told in the county history, but gives the additional, though incidental, information that Lincoln's visit was "some time between 1835 and 1840—the exact year is not known; he visited Sheboygan, but concluded that place had no future before it. He returned to Port Washington and stopped there for two days, during which time he arranged with General Harrison for the rent of quarters for his law office. This was in the fall of the year, and the arrangement was that

<sup>2</sup> P. 542.

Mr. Lincoln should return in the spring and take possession of his quarters. In the spring, however, the floods put a quietus on all travel—the West was fairly afloat in the freshet, and the heavy rain storms kept up until late in the summer. Under these conditions Mr. Lincoln decided to locate elsewhere and later sent his regrets to General Harrison.”

Harry W. Bolens is the son of an enterprising and well-known newspaper man; he was therefore in a position to hear much of such traditional history as Lincoln’s visit to Port Washington. He is one of the leading business men of Port Washington, has been its mayor, and is much interested in local history.

Now the question arises: Can these local traditions in any way be verified or corroborated? To try to do so is the object of this paper.

In the first place, the statement that Captain Beger had talked with President Lincoln is not lightly to be cast aside. Captain Beger was born in Germany in 1841, came to Wisconsin with his parents in 1846, enlisted in the army in October, 1864, and served as a noncommissioned officer until the end of the war, when he returned to Wisconsin. Mr. Bolens writes me under date of March 24, 1920: “I knew Captain Beger, who conversed with Lincoln, and he told me the story many times.”

Although tradition does not know the year of Lincoln’s visit to Port Washington, it reports that he was there in the fall. This, we shall see, is significant.

The matter of the weather preventing Lincoln’s return to Port Washington seems suspicious. But the records kept by officers of the United States army at Fort Howard show that 1836 was a year of abnormally heavy rainfall, the record in the spring and summer being as follows: March, 3.2 inches; April, 6.37; May, 5.2; June, 3.5; and July, 5.06. This corroborates that part of the tradition relating to the

weather and indicates that Lincoln visited Port Washington in the fall of 1835. If he saw General Harrison at Port Washington he could not have done so in any other season of that year, for Harrison did not get to the Port Washington region until September 7, 1835. We know definitely about Lincoln's whereabouts during the whole of the year 1835 except during the months of October and November, which, in the biographies, are absolutely blank.

The question now presents itself: Can Lincoln's visit to Wisconsin, which tradition as amplified by the records of the United States officers at Green Bay places in the fall of the year 1835, be dovetailed into his life at New Salem? This will lead into an absolutely new phase of the question, and though the matter is supported by no such direct and definitely reported fact as Captain Beger's interview, the circumstantial evidence seems to me to be strong and connects the visit with the great tragedy of Lincoln's life—the untimely death of Ann Rutledge. This occurred August 25, 1835. I need not rehearse the details of this "saddest chapter in Lincoln's life." It was long suppressed, evidently out of tender consideration for others, but it is a well-known story today. Herndon told it in 1866 in that wonderful lecture which he called *Abraham Lincoln, Miss Ann Rutledge, New Salem, Pioneering, and the Poem*.<sup>3</sup> He told it again in his great work on Lincoln, and others have retold it in the form of both history and fiction.<sup>4</sup>

In brief, the effect upon Lincoln was overwhelming. It caused him to walk the narrow path between sanity and insanity. As Herndon puts it in the lecture: "He sorrowed and grieved, rambled over the hills and through the forests, day and night. He suffered and bore it for a while like a great man—a philosopher. He slept not, he ate not, joyed not. This he did until his body became emaciated and weak

<sup>3</sup> Springfield, Illinois, 1910.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Soul of Ann Rutledge*, by Bernie Babcock, 1919.

and gave way. His mind wandered from its throne." Then later, Herndon has these significant words: "*The friends of Mr. Lincoln—men, women and children—begged him to quit his home and place of business. They coaxed and threatened him by turns, in order to get him to quit the places and scenes of his sorrows and griefs.*"

Herndon further records that in September Mr. Lincoln was induced to go into the country to spend some time with his good friends Bowlin Green and wife and adds that "in the space of a week or ten days . . . Lincoln rose up, a man once more. . . . He got well and bade adieu, for a short season, to Bowlin's kind roof and generous hospitality. . . . He went back to New Salem, as thought, a radically changed man. He went to New Salem about the last of September A.D. 1835."

Herndon then tells of Lincoln's fondness for the poem "Oh, Why Should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud?" and concludes his lecture with this sentence: "It was about the 20th day of October A.D. 1835 that Abraham Lincoln, as he wandered and wended his sad and melancholy way over hill and dale, gloomily burst forth"—and here follows the whole of the poem.

Now it is to be remarked that that lone date, "the 20th day of October A.D. 1835," is the only date I can find in the Lincoln biographies for the autumn months of October and November, 1835, and in the setting Herndon gives it, it seems strangely discordant and insignificant.

But even with that menacing obstacle to my argument, there was ample time after October 20th, or even before it, to have made the journey into Wisconsin under comfortable conditions of weather.

It is not possible in this paper to take up the question of the practicable possibility of such a lone trip as early as 1835, except to call attention to the fact that two years earlier the pioneer of Norwegian emigration, Kleng Peerson,

walked from Chicago to Milwaukee alone.<sup>5</sup> There was an Indian trail from Chicago to Green Bay.

And why should Lincoln at this time have a desire to visit Wisconsin?

If he was to follow the advice of his friends, as Herndon puts it, "to quit the places and scenes of his sorrows and griefs," to what better place could he have gone? He had seen enough of that region during his brief period of soldiering to know that it had many attractions. In fact, the Black Hawk War was Wisconsin's introduction to the American people. "There was an immediate and rapid increase of immigration, not only in the mining region but in various other parts of what is now Wisconsin, more especially in that portion bordering on Lake Michigan."<sup>6</sup> Lincoln surely knew of this strong trend of immigration.<sup>7</sup> Then he may have wanted to see Lake Michigan, particularly as the eastern part of the state was the most accessible. From his early experiences with river boats we know that he was fond of the water.

Such was the depth of Lincoln's sorrow after the death of Ann Rutledge that he may have thought he could not live and labor where she had died. Be that as it may, he was well enough in October, 1835, to realize that a change of scene would be beneficial. And to support this assumption it is possible to cite an analogous case in the life of Lincoln where he spoke of the advantage of "a change of scene." These are Lincoln's own words, used in a letter to his close friend, Joshua F. Speed, dated March 27, 1842. This was at a time after "that fatal first of January, 1841," when he wrote to his law partner, Major Stuart, in Congress: "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel

<sup>5</sup> At Milwaukee Peerson found only two white men, Solomon Juneau and his brother.

<sup>6</sup> *History of Washington and Ozaukee Counties* (Chicago, 1881), 40.

<sup>7</sup> "Returning troopers praised her soil and fertility. Eastern newspapers exploited her inviting opportunities for emigrants. Pamphlet literature furnished travelers' guides." Louise P. Kellogg, in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, September, 1919, 40.



were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me. . . . I say this because I fear I shall not be able to attend to any business here, and a change of scene might help me. If I could be myself I would rather remain at home with Judge Logan. I can write no more." The following summer he visited his good friend Speed in his Kentucky home "and was much helped by the change of scene."<sup>8</sup>

I trust that this investigation has fixed the year of Lincoln's visit to Port Washington and established the fact that it was made in consequence of the great tragedy of his life, the death of Ann Rutledge in 1835, "that strange, lovely, heroic, pathetic story, which so many have tried to tell, but which still awaits the touch of a master hand."<sup>9</sup> When that master appears, as he surely will, it will enhance his interest in the tale if it may truthfully be added that Lincoln sought surcease of his great grief by a visit to the wilds of the territory of Wisconsin, and even thought of making his home there.

Lincoln's third visit to Wisconsin was made in 1859, the year after the great debates with Stephen A. Douglas. He was invited to make an address at the State Fair held in Milwaukee September 30, upon the invitation, in Lincoln's words, "of the Agricultural Society of the young, prosperous, and soon to be great State of Wisconsin." On this occasion he made a remarkable address on agriculture, which in recent years due to the increasing interest in scientific agriculture has attracted much attention; for in this address Lincoln flashed forth a vision of agricultural

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Fort Newton, *Lincoln and Herndon* (Cedar Rapids, 1910), 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

The world is agreed that labor is the source from which human wants are mainly supplied. There is no dispute upon this point. From this point however, men immediately diverge. Much disputation is maintained as to the best way of applying and controlling the labor element. By some it is assumed that labor is available only in connection with capital. That nobody labors, unless somebody else, owning capital, somehow, by the use of that capital, induces him to do it. Having assumed this, they proceed to consider whether it is best that capital shall hire laborers, and thus induce them to work by their own consent; or buy them, and drive them to it without their consent. Having proceeded so far they naturally conclude that all laborers are necessarily either hired laborers, or slaves. They further assume that whoever is once a hired laborer, is forever fixed in that condition for life; and thence again that his condition is as bad as, or worse than, that of a slave. This is the "moral slavery" theory. But another class of reasoners, hold the op-

progress that only recently has been realized through our great American agricultural experiment stations.

This speech was printed in the Milwaukee *Sentinel* the day after its delivery;<sup>10</sup> in the *Proceedings* of the Agricultural Society of Wisconsin; and in the C. S. Hammond and Company's edition of Lincoln's works, published in 1907. It is not, so far as I know, mentioned in any other of the biographies. At the time of the Lincoln centenary this address was not known to the Agricultural College of the University of Wisconsin. Some years afterwards I called the attention of the authorities to it, and later a special bulletin containing most of the address was published by the college for distribution among the farmers of Wisconsin as an inspiration to their agricultural efforts. I have at present in my possession a page of the manuscript in Lincoln's handwriting used for the Milwaukee address. It was presented to Lathrop E. Smith of Madison by a *Sentinel* printer the year the speech was delivered. A facsimile of this page accompanies this sketch. The day after the

<sup>10</sup> Considering the reputation that Lincoln had won in his debates with Stephen A. Douglas, he received scant editorial mention from the *Sentinel* on the occasion of his visit to Milwaukee in 1859. The paper did, however, print his speech in full, with the comment that "it is in every sense a practical and readable effort, and will repay attentive perusal."

The address made in Beloit was very fully reported, although not verbatim, in the *Beloit Journal* of October 5, 1859. The newspaper report of the Janesville speech is not so full. But the details of Lincoln's visit to both Beloit and Janesville are still remembered by some of the older citizens.

Although the Milwaukee papers made but slight editorial mention of Lincoln in 1859, there was fortunately present at his address a newspaper man who did make significant comment. He represented a paper called *The Wisconsin Pinery*, published at Stevens Point. The article was entitled "Old Abe," and runs as follows: "Lincoln delivered a short address which he had nicely written out, folded in the *Wisconsin*, and tucked away under his left arm, when I first saw him. His heart and other internal arrangements are a long way from his head. He looks as if he was made for wading in deep water. The women say he is homely,—I say he is handsome. He has a long nose, a wrinkled, clean-shaven face, large dark eyes, black eye-brows, a forehead that juts over his eyes like a cornice, long and full, sloping up into a wealth of black hair. He looks like an open-hearted, honest man who has grown sharp in fighting knives. His face is swarthy and filled with very deep, long thought-wrinkles. He inspires confidence. His hearers feel sure that he will not lead them astray, or fail to make a point if he attempts to. I think he is very much like Clay, without the light complexion and fiery enthusiasm. His voice is not heavy, but has a clean trumpet tone that can be heard an immense distance. Except N. P. Banks, I never heard a man who could talk to a large crowd with such ease. The address was a short sweet Lincolnism. He thrust a stiletto into Hammond's 'mud-sill' theory. It did not please everybody, I suppose, and therefore it was something positive and good."

Milwaukee address Mr. Lincoln spoke at Beloit in the afternoon and in the city of Janesville in the evening.<sup>11</sup> On both occasions he made political speeches.

<sup>11</sup> An account of this visit to Beloit and Janesville is given in *Wis. Hist. Colls.* XIV 134-35.